**I Want to Work[[1]](#footnote-1)** by Sherwood Anderson

I went home with a workman from a meeting of unemployed. He had come in there, out of curiosity, just like me. We coincidently came out of the meeting at the same time and stopped outside to talk.

The preliminary talk led to another and the next day we met. "Yes, I'm out of work. I'm fifty-two, you see." He was a sturdily-built, practical man. "I used to make big wages. I should have got prepared for this unemployment. But I didn't. I was proud, sure of myself. I thought things would always go on as they were. When I did make good money I spent it."



He was a machinist as a young man and later became a machine-tender in a factory. He was out of work for two years. I asked him to meet me at my hotel but he didn't like the idea.

"No," he said, "I'm not dressed for it. You come on home with me."

This was in the early afternoon of a cold day. He was in blue overalls and wore a shabby coat. His thick, stiff gray hair was only half covered by his cap. He wore the cap tilted a bit to one side – with an attitude of- "Yes I'm as good as the next guy.”

We went down to where he lived, stopping at a corner grocer's on the way. "I'll get a few bottles of beer," I said.

"All right. I’ll have a bottle of beer with you."

I got his story, on the way and as we sat in his house. It was an every-day, common enough story.

He was married as a young man and had one daughter who married a young workman, a machine-fixer like himself. When he was forty his wife died and two years later he got a new wife. He got a young one, nearly twenty years younger than himself, but they had no children.

"They are all at work," he said, "my wife, my daughter, and her husband."

His daughter and her husband had no children. The three of them, his own wife, his daughter, and her husband, had bought a house - it was a small, neat frame house on a little hill near a district of huge factories in a Southern industrial town. When we got there we climbed a flight of stairs to a bedroom on the second floor. "You wait and I'll go stir up the furnace and get some glasses for the beer," he said, and when he returned he began to talk - "You see," he said, "I tend to the furnace. I do what I can around here."

He said something, speaking a little bitterly about what he couldn't do, "I should have been born a woman. If I could cook for the others now. If I could do the family wash, it would save money for them."

You could see that he had been moved, by circumstances, outside the life of the house in which he had once been the head of the house.

The important point is the way he was accepting it. It was obviously the old story of a man whose civilization had finished with him before he was finished with it. He had got laid off, when the Depression hit the town, and then, later, when his shop started up again, a younger man got his place. "I'm not as fast as I once was," he said, "but I'm a careful man, a good workman yet."

He said he didn't want to offer to work for less wages than the younger man, who had been taken back. "If you begin that," he said, "you cut the pay standard of a whole shop."

We sat in two chairs by a window that looked down on the factories while we drank our beer and talked. An old feeling, so common in American men, concerned with modern industry – was pride in the very thing that has apparently thrown his life out of gear.

I have talked to many manufacturers and factory superintendents, and rarely, I think never, have I visited a factory shop without being shown some new machine.

Here, in a tin can factory, is a machine that makes can tops. It is the superintendent of the shop showing me through. "When I first came to work here, when I first became a foreman, we had a machine that turned out forty can tops a minute. There was a man at work on every machine. Now you see this long battery of machines. The two men you see walking up and down take care of them all. They don't work so hard. There isn't any heavy work in any modern shop.

"When I was a young man here, a young foreman, I used to go home at night, having seen a new machine installed that would knock out forty can tops a minute. I used to think 'Are there enough people in the world to use so many tin cans?'" He laughed. "Look at these machines," he said, with pride in his voice. "Every machine in this long row of machines is knocking out three hundred and sixty can tops a minute."

"And you have laid off many men who can never get back into this factory?"

"Yes."

"I do not see many older men."

"No. The younger ones get the job. They are quicker, you see, less likely to get hurt."

I asked him what I have asked many men in positions of control and power in industry. "When you are all doing it, laying off so many men who can never get work again, aren't you laying off your own customers, users of things you make here?"

"Yes, we are, all right."

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

That was the attitude of most of the supervisors in control of the factories. What about the workmen?

Those who say that American workmen, so often now thrown out of their place in our social and economic scheme by the modern machine, so often robbed of something peculiarly vital to their [feeling of manhood](http://webpages.mcgill.ca/students/clin13/web/story2.html#storyg14) – don’t like the machines-- this I kept thinking the most important thing of all, the point I keep hoping that we may come more and more to understand and appreciate.

The machines themselves apparently becoming always faster and faster, more and more efficient - the man in the street can see it with his own eyes in the increased beauty, speed, and efficiency of the automobile - as though there were actually a kind of devil sleeping down in these so-gorgeously beautiful masses of steel in action.

Those who hold that American workmen do not want to work with the machines, that they do not want to be in the factories, simply do not know what they are talking about.

In the greater majority of American workmen, and now in American workwomen, is an actual love of the machine and - yes, I am sure of it - in spite of everything - love of the factories. There are, to be sure, always the stupid ones, the dull ones, but the numbers of the other constantly amazes.

The workman, past his prime, who knew what had happened to him and with whom I drank the beer, had got into the habit of going into the public library of the town. As I have said, we were in a Southern town. "I was born a Yank," he said.

"So was I," I said.

His father, a carriage blacksmith, had come south after World War I when he was a young boy.

"The kids here used to dog me a lot about being a Yank."

"So I thought, sometime, I thought, when I have time, I'm going to read up on the Civil War. "I'd never been much to read before."

He had got on to one of my own hobbies. "Well," I said.

"Now there was Grant," he said. "I've got to liking that man, at least to liking what he was when he was just a general, before he got to be President. He wasn't such a smart man, but I figure he had the big idea all right."

"Yes? And how?"

"I've been figuring it out. I've got plenty of time to figure things out. A lot of the Northern generals during the war couldn't see the war as a whole. That's what made it last so long."

"You mean?"

"You see, I figure, they thought of a battle as a battle. I think he saw the war as a war."

"He and [Lincoln](http://webpages.mcgill.ca/students/clin13/web/story2.html#storyg20), eh?"

"Yes," he said.

"I've been thinking," he said, "that some day, maybe -

"We may see it as a whole, what we are up against."

I left him sitting in the room and went down the stairs and into the street and on the next day I got into the factory where he had been employed. It was a good one, very modern, very big, light, and efficient.

On the day when I left him and got into the street I wasn't thinking of that.

"They were O.K. They can sure take it," was what I was thinking. And I was thinking that the most pathetic thing of all - in the workman who had been put to one side by his civilization - was his undying so-American optimism.

**Glossary – I Want to Work**

Meeting of unemployed: A meeting of people who had lost their jobs and were out of work.

Sturdily-built: Solid, strong-looking, stocky.

Machinist ... machine-tender: One who works with machinery or runs a machine.

Overalls: Loose, heavy trousers worn by workmen to protect their clothes.

Frame house: A house that is built of wood.

Southern industrial town: A town in one of the Southern states, near the East Coast, where the business is mostly manufacturing, rather than farming.

Thrown life out of gear (figurative): Suddenly forced to shift or change his direction in life

Manufacturers and factory superintendents: Owners and managers of companies that make (manufacture) goods to sell.

Can tops: Small, round tins cut out to fit the tops of cans and seal them shut.

Long battery of machines: A long row or series of machines.

Positions of control: Jobs where important decisions are made, places of power.

Thrown out of their place: Replaced, pushed aside.

Social and economic scheme: The system by which a person works and earns money, which he can then spend on things he needs and wants.

Feeling of manhood: A sense of one's masculinity, or of having a man's role in society.

So-gorgeously beautiful masses of steel: Machines that are spectacular in their ability to work effectively and well.

Yank: Someone from the Northeast region of the United States.

Carriage blacksmith: A builder of iron frames for horsedrawn vehicles.

After the war: The American Civil War between the Northern and the South, 1861-1865.

Grant (Ulysses S.): General Grant was appointed by President Lincoln to lead the Union Army against the South during the Civil War. He won great military victories and was later elected President (1869-1877). However, he was unable to stop the dishonest activities of government officials he had appointed.

The big idea: A broad understanding of reality and the truth.

Lincoln: President Abraham Lincoln, who supported Grant's strong military actions with the Union Army because he was determined to keep the South from becoming a separate country.

Put to one side: (literal or literally) moved away from the center; (figurative) left out of reach of the opportunities and advantages most people want and expect to have.

1. Reference: Mullen, J. S. (1984). Outsiders: American Short Stories for Students of ESL. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. "I Want to Work", by Sherwood Anderson. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)